

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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apartamento





Modena, 1977.

appartamento - Luigi Ghirri

Connors, Matt, and Adele Ghirri. "The Interiors of Luigi Ghirri." *Apartamento*, no. 26, Autumn/Winter 2020–21, pp. 82–115.

I'm a painter, but I often look to photography as much as anything for lessons on how to think, how to see, and then, how to make. Last year I was offered a dream opportunity to curate an exhibition from the vast archives of one of my favourite artists, the Italian photographer Luigi Ghirri (1943–92). Ghirri was a former cartographer turned photographer/artist, who worked for most of his life in and around his home province of Reggio Emilia, in northern Italy. His work emerged from the world of conceptual artists who were then blossoming in Italy and elsewhere. Like them, Ghirri was interested in reading the world around him as the various signs, ideas, and languages that make it up, but unlike conceptual art's effort to dematerialise, Ghirri's work seems to create new and parallel worlds through his small, subtle, and object-like photographs (all of his photographs are unique/non-editioned). Ghirri's photographs somehow feel like they have rebuilt or rewritten the world that lay in front of his camera. He was almost as interested in painted or photographic images of the world as he was in the material world itself, often using his photos to confuse or combine the two. After conquering an initial terror of the responsibility of creating a new take on the beloved photographer's work, I had an epiphany when I relaxed into the idea of starting just where I was, as a painter, looking at photographs. In January I visited Adele, Ghirri's daughter, at the archive and family home in Roncole Verdi, and with her help I was able to investigate all of my hunches and ideas about Ghirri's work throughout his long career. Shortly after that, Italy went into lockdown and not much later, so did Los Angeles, where I was spending the winter. Adele and I continued our conversation over the following months and into the summer, picking apart the reasons why a painter might be so obsessed with a photographer.

Sunday, August 9, 2020

Hi from Los Angeles, where I've been since January. It's so nice to see that you're getting some vacation time; I remember thinking that you had already been locked down in Reggio for so long when the lockdown finally started in LA. My visit to see you and the archive was my last trip abroad before the pandemic. I feel so lucky to have made it in time. Who knows when Americans will be able to visit Europe again, although I'm sure it's very nice without us! I've just finished installing the show remotely—via a model and tiny maquette versions of the photos (it was very fun)—so I've been really thinking about Luigi and his work again. To me the photos are intricate spaces, actual objects themselves, especially because Luigi never editioned them; they're all unique. Choreographing these into the gallery space was a challenge. It felt very much like painting or writing. This feels right. I had started to think of Luigi as a photographer who writes or collages or, actually, who builds, with signs he discovered in the world instead of just encountering or reading those signs and then taking pictures of them, if that makes any sense. I realised when working on the show that the Italian phrase for 'taking a picture' is more like 'making a picture', and that, to me, really sums up what I'm getting at—making versus taking.

Then, when doing research, I was so excited to find a text that explained how much Luigi was fascinated with 'the idea of building', which I'm now using as the title of the show. I think the objectness/building idea is such an exciting way to think about Luigi's work. Even when his subject was interiors, it seems like Luigi was building within the found spaces, with and inside other people's stuff (even his own), or putting



Untitled. From the series *Fotografie del periodo iniziale*, 1971-73.

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Ferrara, 1981.

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Parigi, 1979.

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Above: *Ponza*, 1986.

Next spread: *Villa Pirondini, Correggio*. From the series *Paesaggio Italiano*, 1990.

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Reggio Emilia. From the series Paesaggio Italiano, 1984.

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Modena, 1979.

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Firenze, 1985.

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the camera in places, in ways that either tangled up layers and objects and dimensions, foreground and background—or separated, called attention to them. Interiors are treated in the same way he treated exteriors or even landscapes or cityscapes.

I keep thinking of the fact that you've lived in the same house your whole life. The house really felt like one of Luigi's pictures to me, and the town did for sure, as I'd seen so many of Luigi's pictures of it before I even arrived. Does it ever seem that way to you? I wonder if you see your house or even your town through the filter of Luigi's way of seeing? And, also, I keep thinking of the renovation you're doing now on the interior walls at the house, taking the paint off to reveal the old decorative frescoes. This seems weirdly in keeping with Luigi's ways of seeing and finding, even if it's happening after he's no longer here. In his images of interiors, decorative elements (like the frescoes at your house) are so often used to suggest space or to reveal the fakeness of the spaces being photographed.

Thursday, August 20, 2020

Saluti from Montebello, a small medieval town on the hills near Rimini. I'm writing from my house, our second home where I spend the summer every year. Only 16 people live here, so life must be very different from LA! The fact that you had to install the show remotely using maquettes of the exhibition space and of the artworks themselves made me think about *In Scala*, a series that Luigi conceived here, in Rimini, at the theme park Italia in Miniatura—where you can easily walk around miniaturised reproductions of the Italian peninsula with scale models of all the most important landmarks. The San Pietro Basilica in Rome and the Pirelli Tower in Milan are just a short walk away; the Alps, three metres tall, are built in papier-mâché—a smaller representation of the physical world. Luigi said that 'scale indicates difference'. A photographic image, I believe, does the same. The idea of playing with scale in order to point out and question the difference between the physical world and its representation is at the core of his practice.

This brings me back to your reading of Luigi's work as a matter of building and making, rather than capturing fleeting moments. As you rightfully pointed out, Luigi did not intend to use photography as a technique for reproducing or witnessing something which is 'already there'; rather, as he wrote, 'there is nothing old under the sun'. He chose the photographic medium as a language through which he could explore and investigate the world he lived in—made of other images, signs, layers, plans, objects—thus building and creating new meanings and narratives.

When Luigi conceived a series, an exhibition, or a book, he would directly engage with the material aspects of such a process. He would use small contact prints, mix them, find the right sequence, and glue them on the pages of an album, as if—as you described—he was a writer in the act of choosing the right words to create a sentence. In the end, the way in which you had to install the exhibition at the gallery is not so different from the way Luigi used to think of his work, which is certainly the result of a continuous process of assemblage. This was as important as the final outcome.

Perhaps it depends on the fact that Luigi was trained and had worked as a surveyor before starting his artistic research. Working as a surveyor, you have to translate 2D drawings into actual buildings. With photography, in a way, you do the opposite. Yet, in Luigi's pictures of



New York, 1989.

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Parma, 1984.

Next spread: *Teatro Valli, Reggio Emilia*. From the series *Paesaggio Italiano*, 1986.

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Svizzera, 1972.

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interiors, it is possible to perceive how space is constructed, shaped, organised. His education and his knowledge of geometry certainly had an influence on his way of representing and approaching interiors with a camera.

Did you know he designed and built a house in Modena for him and his family in the '70s? It looks very different from the one he bought later with my mother, the one where I still live and that you visited while working on the exhibition. I can understand why you felt the same atmosphere you found in his pictures; I think he was fascinated by the typical architecture of the old houses you can find in the northern Italian countryside, and many images of interiors were taken in that type of building. For example, one of the pictures you selected for the show (the one with the recording studio) was taken in Villa Pirondini, and the structure of that villa is almost identical to my house; the light enters in the same way.

I am not sure whether I see my house or my town through 'the filter' of Luigi's way of seeing. I grew up there, surrounded by his photos, so for me this is all very natural and spontaneous. If I were looking at the world through that filter I wouldn't be able to tell. I would say his work influenced my way of looking more in terms of attention, attitude, curiosity. To me, Luigi made certain details which are often overlooked naturally visible, like shadows, reflections, symmetries, or connections between space and shapes.

Monday, August 24, 2020

Hi Adele! What do you mean 16 people live there?! In the town or in the house with you? Is it one of those abandoned medieval towns? The one from the picture you sent of Luigi holding up peace signs with both hands? I looked at the satellite view on Google Maps and now I think you mean 16 people, total. I want to come visit! Was it always so deserted? It's funny that I didn't think of the photos from the Italy in Miniature theme park while I was working with the model for the show; those are some of my favourite pictures of his. Is the theme park still there? It is really coincidentally appropriate that I was forced to deal with scale in such a similar way. Also, a lot of the images I chose have lots of nested images inside them, so the tiny versions of them were really complex! I like what you said about photography being a kind of reverse process of the surveying trade that Luigi was trained in. It must have been a little disorienting to switch between transforming two dimensions into three, and then in his off hours reversing the journey, translating, or maybe more like rendering it all right back onto a small piece of paper, almost exactly like a drawing again. It would definitely make for a brain that considers pictures as raw material. I did not know that he designed and built a house, but it really makes sense. Did he ever photograph it?

The pictures from Villa Pirondini are also some of my favourites; that room has almost the same frescoes that you are uncovering now at your house. They make the space really strange in the room, almost doubling the space (again, from 2D to 3D and back), and then the room itself is filled with this incredible trail of musical instruments: drums, synthesisers, amps, cords, cables, but with no people, and this incredible oblique light, with a vanishing point out the back door. It really looks like a painting by Puvis de Chavannes or something. I keep seeing paintings in all the photos—because I'm a painter—but I think I can tell that painting was important to Luigi. He frequently focuses

on painting or drawing that he found within images of interiors, in addition to the painted façades, carnival rides, close-ups of maps that almost become abstract. He's almost hunting for it. At your house I saw these framed children's posters (I think?) that were hanging opposite each other, one about 'the elements of photography' and the other about 'the elements of painting'. I picked one photo of someone actually painting a landscape, and a lot of the interiors I chose have painting, drawing, or extremely graphic/decorative elements, especially the picture from the big discotheque. Do you think Luigi thought about painting and drawing?

Monday, August 31, 2020

Hi Matt, in Montebello there are 16 people in total (but there are two restaurants)! And yes, the house is the one that appears in the picture I sent you, with Luigi standing in front of it! In the '90s there was a big group of children and we had so much fun; only one child lives there today. But it doesn't feel like an abandoned village. It at-



Italia in Miniatura, 1977.

tracts many visitors, the food is excellent, and you can see the whole Adriatic Riviera from the medieval castle. (I have just discovered that Kanye West and Kim Kardashian ate at the local osteria on a quiet evening in October when no one else was around.) You need to come visit sometime soon, so I can take you to Italia in Miniatura, which, of course, is still open to the public.

Going back to your questions, Luigi did not photograph the house he designed in Modena, but some of the photos from Identikit were taken there, and all the pictures from Atlante were taken in the basement of that house, in 1973. The frescoes at Villa Pirondini definitely look like the ones I recently discovered at my house! I wonder if Luigi knew they were there, underneath a thin layer of white paint, when he and my mother bought it in the early '90s. As you said, frescoes are a recurring subject in his work. I think that throughout his lifetime, Luigi looked at painting more than he looked at photography. I never had the chance to have a conversation with him about it, and he never openly talked about this, so these are all suggestions. But in his work, in his writings, among the books in his library, I look for traces and hints that can guide me through these sorts of questions. Luigi col-



Casa Benati, 1976.

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Mantova. From the series Paesaggio Italiano, 1985.

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Studio Aldo Rossi, 1989-90.

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Villa Pirondini, Correggio, 1990.

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lected many volumes on the history of painting: Italian Renaissance, the Old Masters, Dutch painters, and the artists he loved the most, like Piero della Francesca, Pieter Bruegel, Jan Vermeer, Pieter Jansz Saenredam, just to name a few.

Luigi had a particular interest in painting since he was a kid; he recounted that his parents, who came from a rural background, would save money just to take him and his sister on a day trip to Florence, where they got to see frescoes by Beato Angelico, Ghirlandaio, or Giotto. These first encounters with the Old Masters really struck him and had a great influence on his thought, and it is during these short trips that Luigi started photographing with a small camera. After that, he never stopped enquiring and interrogating himself about the enigmatic aspects of vision, and of images themselves. His endless interest and curiosity in art history shaped his way of looking and his sensibility: images within other images, mise en abymes, frontal views, ambiguous juxtapositions or reflections—these elements are traditionally employed in painting and are all present in Luigi's work.



Left: *Ritratto di Ghirri*. Walter Lotti, 1956. Right: *Ritratto di Walter Lotti*. Luigi Ghirri, 1971.

Besides that, when he was young, he spent a lot of time at the studio of his uncle Walter Lotti, a painter, and he always acknowledged the importance of this relationship in his growth as an artist. Lotti's favourite subject was Scandiano, the small town where Luigi was born. By no coincidence, in the '80s Luigi photographed the same country fair that Uncle Walter painted when Luigi was a child. Those paintings were the door through which Luigi started developing his interest in art, in the 'realm' of images, in any representation of the external world. His research, in this respect, focused on questions of perception, how we organise—or better yet, how we build—the structure of the world through perception and how we translate that by means of a visual language (whether it's painting, drawing, or photography). He was a passionate reader of philosophy, and the writing of authors such as Giordano Bruno, Erwin Panofsky, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or Walter Benjamin were the most important references in this sense.

I keep wondering what he would think about the proliferation of images we have experienced over the past two decades, the way in which they circulate, and how this is affecting our thoughts and our perception of the world.



Fenis. From the series *Paesaggio Italiano*, 1981.

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Tuesday, September 8, 2020

Hi Adele, I didn't know about Luigi's painter uncle and this big influence on him. Has anyone ever shown their work together? It's so interesting that he was also very location-focused. It seems like Luigi then took it to the extreme in the Identikit works he created—photographing his own and other people's bookshelves and books to make these portrait/interior/landscape hybrids out of them. I was looking at a picture from this series after you mentioned it, and I think it must be Luigi's own books; the top shelf has so many painting books! (Kandinsky, Klee, Delacroix, Cimabue, Morandi, etc.) The bottom shelf is almost all about music and musicians, which is another real thread that runs through his work. It's something that fascinates me, probably because I'm also very music-focused and am always thinking about how it could come into my own work. I remember when you and I were in Bologna and you told me all about his super close friendship with the Italian singer Lucio Dalla. He writes about music a lot (there's a piece in his book *The Collected Essays* where he talks about hating Prince, which I would like to take issue with!). His images of the band set-up in the Villa Pirondini we were talking about, and all the different record cover art he did, as well as just general pictorial references to music (written music, musical instruments) get at something about his use of the material/objective world to picture the immaterial. It's hard to explain what I mean. It makes me think about your story of him being down in the basement of the house he built, photographing the Atlante series, making extreme close-ups of map pages, and the resulting images being these otherworldly, kind of oceanic or spacey abstractions. From the basement out into space! That kind of encapsulates the magic of his whole practice for me. Hope all's well in Italy. I think maybe you are back in Reggio now?

Thursday, September 10, 2020

Dear Matt, I am finally back home after my holidays! Yes, Luigi's and Uncle Walter's works were shown together in an exhibition in 1997, and it was accompanied by a small catalogue. In my previous email I forgot to mention Morandi as one of Luigi's dearest artists. The work Luigi did at his studio/house in Bologna at the end of the '80s is also quite representative of what you said in relation to the Identikit series, making a portrait of a person, an artist, only by showing their personal objects, the light, and the atmosphere of their lived, intimate space. Moving to the bottom shelf: music constantly accompanied Luigi through his lifetime, during his work and travels. Luigi, as you probably know, was literally obsessed with Bob Dylan! His love for music led him to the collaborations with several Italian singers and musicians in the '80s, above all Lucio Dalla, with whom he shared a close friendship. He and my mother followed Dalla during his tours in Italy, Paris, and the US. The famous *DallAmeriCaruso* album was recorded during the American tour and the cover artwork was designed by my mother. As well as painting, music informed Luigi's work and poetics more than any other medium. Indeed, he built a large vinyl collection year by year, which now includes thousands of pieces, some of which appear in Identikit. Sometimes, on the bookshelves, among the books and records, we can see other things—like a small globe, dried flowers, postcards, reproductions of paintings, and so on. I recently discovered that Luigi named those arrangements 'nests', which somehow brings me back to the title of the exhibition you have chosen, 'The Idea of Building'. I can't wait for this to happen. My very best, and thank you again for everything!



Marina di Ravenna, 1970.

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